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AUTHOR McDonald, Jessyna M.
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ABSTRACT

The population of older black Americans is a growing, underutilized resource. Research on the status of older black Americans suggests that race is among the major factors influencing economic status and social mobility. Recent census data and projections confirm that to be old and black is a liability rather than an asset. As this population lives longer, increasing concern for their physical and emotional well being is justified. However, although current trends and projections reflect a pessimistic view of the future, the fact that older black Americans have survived and coped with barriers to economic and social mobility leaves room for optimism. They can use their survival skills to help alleviate current problems within their communities. In light of dwindling financial resources, unique and alternative service delivery models must be developed. Service providers must become proactive advocates for the community. Based on their unique and creative survival skills, black elderly individuals can be used as advisors, consultants, instructors, counselors, leaders, and technicians in peer support, family support, and community support service roles. Such service would promote opportunities for self-help and community integration of the black elderly through meaningful roles. (A figure detailing the resource support systems model for black elderly is included.) (BL)

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WESTERN GERONTOLOGICAL SOCIETY ANNUAL MEETING

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PRESENTATION

TO BE OLD, GIFTED, AND BLACK...UNTAPPED RESOURCES

By

Jessyna M. McDonald, Ph.D.
Chair,
Recreation Studies Program
Purdue University
West Lafayette, IN

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INTRODUCTION

Among the fastest growing, yet most underutilized resources are older Black Americans, many of whom have survived the effects of slavery, coupled with historical occupational oppression and discrimination. Despite various economic, social, and political barriers to achievement and mobility, America's Black elderly have not only survived, but made siginificant contributions to the economic growth and development of this country. To be old, gifted, and Black, is not merely a privilege, but also an "untapped resource".

The purpose of this paper is to present various historical and social psychological perspectives on the nature of the Black aging experience in America. In addition, an examination of major issues and problems confronting the Black elderly will be presented, along with concurrent strategies for the utilization of the Black elderly as resources in social, economic, and community development.

Bookter T. Washington, one of the earlier advocates of self-help and racial pride within the Black community, addressed the American Council in July 1903, and stressed constructive and progressive actions among Blacks. Washington (1903) stated:

> In the long run it is the race or individual that exercises the most patience, forebearance, and self-control in the midst of trying conditions that wins...the respect of the world...We have a right in a conservative and sensible manner to enter our complaints, but we shall make a fatal error if we yield to the temptation of

> believing that mere opposition to our wrongs... will take the place of progressive, constructive action...Let us not forget to lay the greatest stress upon the opportunities open to us, especially here in the South, for constructive growth in labor, business and education...An inch of progress is worth more than a yard of complaint (p. 299).

Needless to say, the majority of older Black Americans have exercised "patience, forebearance, and self-control" in the midst of social and economic diversity. Yet, today there appears to be a growing concern relative to the future of older Black Americans.

Since the turn of the century, the older Black American has experienced the "best of times...and the worst of times"...from slavery to emancipation...from sharecropper to landowner...from an agricultural economy to an industrial economy...from World War I to the Great Depression...from World War II to Brown vs. Brown...from the back of the bus to the front of the bus...from the civil rights movement to the War on Poverty...from affirmative action to Bakke...from recession to recovery... It is somewhat paradoxical that a people could have survived the complexities of rapid economic, and social, change, given the inherent inequities in resources.

How did they manage to survive and progress under adverse conditions; Did they adapt to change more readily than other groups; Is survival a learned or inherited behavior; Are Black Americans unique in their coping and survival mechanisms; What can be learned from the Black elderly; How can the experiences of older Blacks be utilized to solve current and future problems? These are a few

of many questions which need further examination, in order to understand the uniqueness of older Black Americans and how their experiences may be utilized as resources.

To Be Old, Gifted, and Black - Liabilities and Assets

While there has been a proliferation of research in the area of gerontology, very little research has been conducted on the Black elderly. A review of literature, however, reveals a general consensus relative to the effects of race, gender, and socio-economic status on the retirement status and life-satisfaction among the elderly. Included among the factors most frequently identified as mitigating the quality-of-life among the elderly are: race, gender, pre-retirement occupational status and income, health status, and access to medical care (Jackson, 1976, 1980; Manuel and Berk, 1983; Rice and Jones, 1982; Tate, 1982; Watson, 1980, 1982).

Watson (1982) cited historical occupational oppression, high incidence of unemployment and underemployment as variables contributing to disparities in differential longevity. According to Watson (1982), "whites, on the average tend to live longer than Blacks in the United States and females longer than males in either group" (p. 153).

Similiarly Tate (1982) concluded that various inequities appeared to exist between blacks and whites, and their respective adjustment to aging. She further contended that the effects of discrimination and de-facto segregation had proliferated the unequal status of Black Americans, throughout their lives.

In 1964, the National Urban League described the phenomenon of being old and black as being in "double jeopardy"...Two decades later, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rigts (1982) referred to older Blacks as being more likely "multiply disadvantaged" by race, age, and socio-econmic status, than their white counterparts.

These observations tend to reflect a rather pessimistic view of the status of older Black Americans and suggest that race is among the major factors influencing economic status and/or social mobility. In many instances, to be "old and Black" has been compared to being a "liabilility" rather than an "asset". Many of these conclusions have been supported by recent census data and projections.

Within the last decade, the older Black population almost doubled, from 16 percent in 1970, to over 34 percent in 1980. According to the U.S. Bureau of Census, in 1981, thirty-nine percent of the Black population, who were 65 years and older, lived below the poverty level, as compared to 13 percent of their white counterparts. In addition, it was reported that, on the avearage, older Blacks are more likely to be disadvantaged than other races (Manuel and Berk, 1983).

Somewhat alarming are the disparities in income reported among older Blacks and whites. In 1981, the mean income for older Black householders was almost half the mean income of older white housholders, with $11,566 and $19,599, respectively. Although there was little difference in the percentage of older whites and Blacks who relied on Social Security as their major source of income, with 94 and 91 percent respecively, in

1980, only five percent of older Blakcs reported incomes from savings as compared to 36 percent of older whites (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1982).

Should these trends continue through the year 2000, there may be even greater disparities between the economic and social status of Black and white older Americans. As a result of these trends, there is increased concern relative to the future of older Americans, particularly, the Black elderly. The bottom line is.. as they live longer, will they live better...?

Given rising health-care costs, coupled with projected declines in medicaid/medicare and social security beneifits, there is increased concern regarding the nature and quality-of-care for older Americans. Current trends in federal program priorities reflect a shift from "institutional-help" to "self-help" programs. These shifts in federal priorities, coupled with public attitudes toward social programs will challenge health and human service providers to develop alternative models for service delivery. The ultimate challenge being to develop services, which are not only, cost effective, but also efficient in meeting the needs of the eldrly, and encourage the elderly to remain autonomous, independent, and productive citizens within their homes and communities.

Among the major program priorities, identified by the National Institute on Aging, are programs which promote self-help and community placement of the elderly. Although the majority of older Blacks reside in their homes and communities, it is evident that many may require various forms of assistance and supportive service. Given declines in federal

assistance and concomitant increases in the cost of living, there is a need to develop and implement alternative models of service delivery and support systems for older Black and poor Americans. It is within this framework, that Black elderly may be utilized as resources in various community and social services.

While current trends and projections reflect a somewhat dismal future for the Black elderly, there is room for optimism and hope. Historically, Black Americans have survived and coped with various barriers to economic and social mobilility. The nature of their survival suggests that Black Americans may have various creative and unique survival skills which were effectively utilized to "turn barriers into bridges".

The average older Black American, between the ages of 65 and over, has, indeed, experienced many "barriers" and "bridges" to economic and social freedom, as well as a diversity of economic, political, industrial and social change, since the turn of the century.

J. Wallace Jackson (1976). author of the Afro-American Experience, presented one of the most vivid protrayals of the Afro-American experience, which highlights the challenges and struggles of Black Americans throughout their history. Jackson (1976) contends that:

> The Afro-American experience represents the most unique social phenomenon in the history of race relations. The history of Afro-Americans chronicles a people torn from their motherland and brought to America in chains; forced into a position of perpetual servitude and subjected to the brutal perpetuation of that status for several generations; liberated from slavery only to be relegated to the status of serfs in an economic system of tenancy and

> sharecropping, persistently isolated by law and custom from the mainstream of society; and deprived of any intellectual heritage and denied any identity other than that of a second-class citizen; and constantly subjected to the negative images of a hostile racial majority who, at best, behaves as they do not exist. The net result has been an adaptive state of mind and a way of life that is without comparison in modern history--the Afro-American (p.133).

The nature of the Black American experience, is indeed, a lesson in survival and progress. Major lesson on adapting, surviving, and coping with various economic, social, and political problems may be learned from the "master-teachers"...older Black Americans. Many of whom were: ..."sharecroppers,..cottonpickers...fieldhands...laborers...cooks ...porters...maids...butlers...carpenters...seamstresses...factory workers...teachers...lawyers...doctors...entrepeneurs...artists...musicians... and are presently, widowers...parents...grandparents".. While many of them have retired from their occupational roles, they should not be disengaged from their social and familial roles. A diversity of untapped skills and resources needed for economic and community development remain virtually, dormant among the Black Elderly. According to the old expression, "use it or lose it".

Untapped Resources - Roles and Models

The Black elderly may be utilized in a variety of nontraditional roles to assist in alleviating many of the problems within their communities. Given current economic and social problems within various communities, there is a need for additional formal and informal support services.

However, projected declines in public assistnce programs and concurrent decreases in tax appropriations, may lead to significant cutbacks in many age-related services and programs. Unless, creative alternative service delivery models are designed and implemented, those in greatest need will continue to be victims of the system. It has been recognized that older Black Americans are the most jeopardized of all goups. The implications are enormous .

Should recent economic and demographic projections be accurate, then Black Americans may live longer. However, the quality of their lives may be mitigated by their economic and social status. The inevitable result may be even more critical problems in the areas of health, nutrition, and housing. Sooner or later, a decision must be made to determine who or what agencies are fiscally, morally, and or socially responsible for this population.

The time has come for those of us, who are committed to increasing the quality-of-life for older Black Americans to begin to "make a difference", and to utilize the resources which are currently existing and readily available. Those resources and talents are not only within us, but also, around us. The time has come for us to assume our responsibilities, as advocates and service providers for the elderly, to become more proactive and creative in our approaches to service delivery. The future is now, and we are their future...If not we, then who..., if not now, then when....

Presented in Figure 1 is a model for the utilization of the Black elderly in selected roles within the following service delivery areas: (a) Peer Support Services; (b) Family Support Services; and (c) Community Support Services. The underlying rationale for the utilization of older Black Americans in these areas is two-fold: first, there is a recognized need for additional informal and formal support services which would promote self-help and independence within the Black community; and (2) the need to provide active and meaningful roles for the elderly, which would assist them in meeting various needs for security, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. The ulitimate goal of this model is to present alternative approaches to the utilization of the elderly in functional community roles, which are not only essential to them, but also, the community-at-large.

Insert Figure 1 about here

The primary objectives of this service delivery model are:

1. To promote opportunities for self-help and community integration of the Black elderly through meaningful roles;
2. To utilize the talents, skills, and resources of older Blacks to alleviate some of the problems inherent to their peers, Black families and communities;
3. To provide opportunities for continued personal and professional growth of the elderly by creating new social and career roles.

4. To develop, implement, and evaluate more cost-effective approaches to the delivery of social and human services.

Among the major problems confronting Black and disadvantaged communities in America are: inadequate housing, poor nutrition, high unemployment, crime and violence, increase in the number of female headed households, single parents, and juvenile delinquency. Adding to the demise of many Black and/or disadvantaged communities, is the presence of a high percentage of elderly individuals who are in critical need of services and support. In many instances, access to and availability of services to assist individuals in solving their economic and social proglems are limited, at best. It is within this framework, that older Black Americans may be instrumental, as well as invaluable resources within their own communities, in the areas of peer, family, and community support services.

Peer Support Services - refer to those services needed by older adults, which are designed to promote self-care and independent living among the elderly. Service delivery roles may include, but are not limited to advisors, counselors, instructors in the areas of: diet and nutrition, health and wellness, financial planning, legal assistance, recreation, leisure and continuing education.

Family Support Services - refer to those services and programs which would assist families with various personal, fianancial, social, and familial problems. Service delivery roles may include counselors, advisors, instructors, technicians in the areas of parenting, marital relations,

domestic arts, home repair and maintenance, nutrition, fianancial planning, early childhood development and day care.

Community Support Services - refer to those services and programs which promote the economic, cultural, and/or social development of the community. Service delivery roles may include: advisors, counselors, technicians, consultants, leaders, advocates in the following areas: education, crime control, community relations, economic and industrial development, municipal programs, and outreach.

These are a few of many nontraditional roles which the elderly may assume in various communities. Not only does this represent an efficient use of human resources, but perhaps a cost-effective approach to the design and delivery of social services. The extent to which these services and programs are efficient and effective will largely depend upon the support of local communities, and will require partnerships between local businesses, governements, and industry. Ultimately, success and progress will depend upon the ability of health and human service managers to re-examine, develop and implement policies which promote the utilization of elderly resources.

While this approach may not be a panacea for the problems of the Black elderly, it may represent the first of many steps toward progress and enhancing the quality-of-life, for not only older Black Americans, but all Americans. In conclusion, I would like to read a poem which I wrote in attempt to describe the breadth, depth, and wealth of the most under-utilized of all human resources...older black Americans.

TO BE OLD, GIFTED & BLACK...UNTAPPED RESOURCES

to be Old..
to be Gifted...
to be Black.....

IS

to be Deep...
to be Dark...
to be Rich...

like Oil,
Untap it, and let if flow,

like Coal,
Set it on fire, and watch it glow,

like Soil,
Plant a seed in it, and watch it grow.

we've got to go Down

TO

bring them Up,

BLACK OIL...
BLACK COAL...
BLACK SOIL...

untap it...unwrap it...release it...unleash it...
unbind it...and you'll find it...let it flow...
then You'll Know....

to Be OLD..
to Be GIFTED...
to Be BLACK...

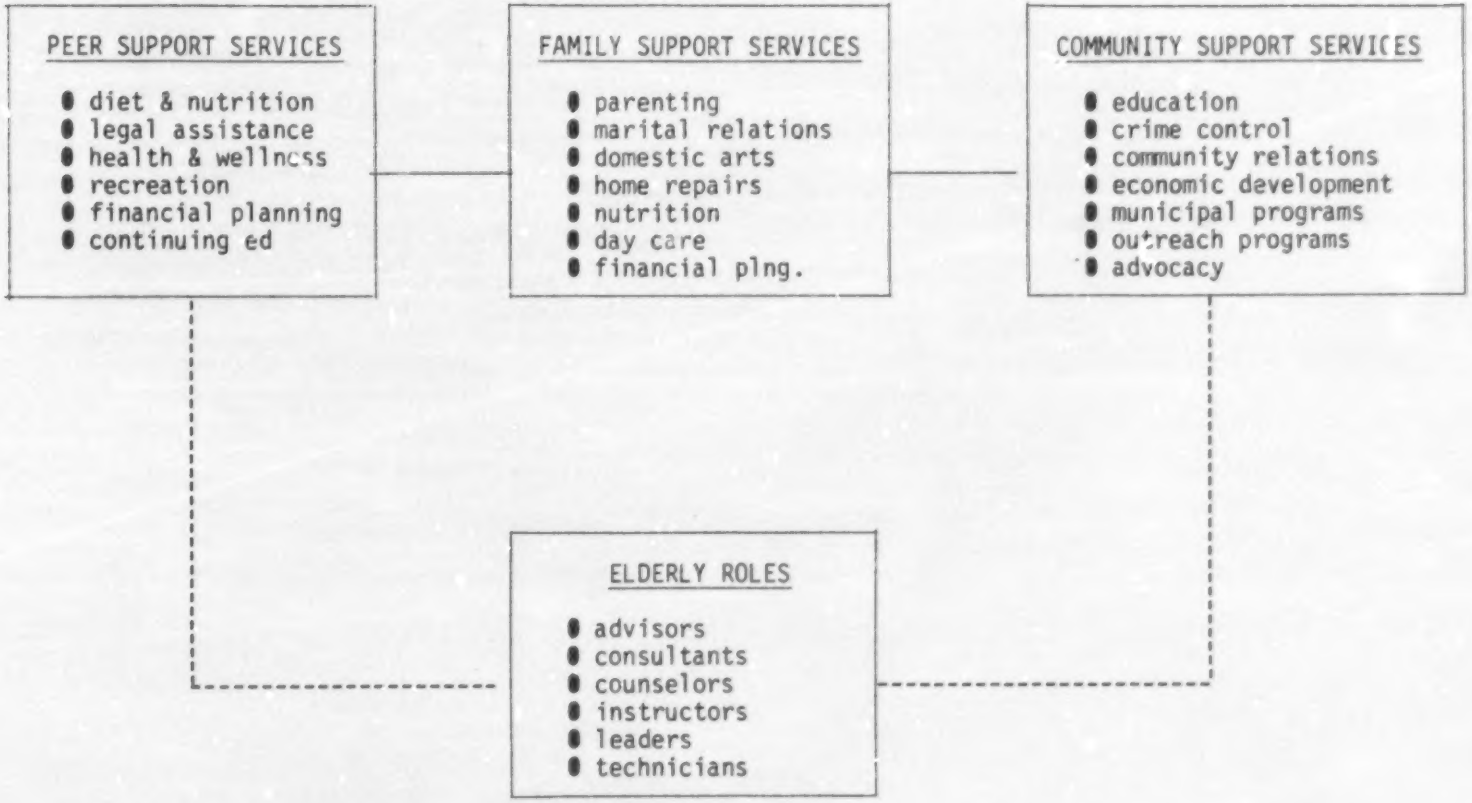
IS

A Gift from GOD...UNWRAPPED .

(jessyna mcdonald, 4/20/84)

FIGURE 1

BLACK ELDERLY RESOURCES-SUPPORT SYSTEMS MODEL



(McDonald, 1984)

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